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SUBJECT: IRISH PRIME MINISTER SAYS IRELAND'S FUTURE LIES WITH EUROPE

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Summary  
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¶1. Following the June 12 'No' vote on the Lisbon Treaty, Prime Minister (Taoiseach) Cowen addressed the Dail (Lower house of Parliament) on June 18, saying that the Government accepted the verdict of the people. Nonetheless, Cowen noted that Ireland's place in the international arena had been realized through its membership in the EU and that the Irish people have been largely comfortable with the EU's overall direction. He declared that it will take time to fully understand the significance of the referendum, and that he did not think there was a clear or obvious set of conclusions that could immediately be drawn. On June 19, Cowen will travel to Brussels where he will attend the European Council with the Heads of Government of other EU member states. His message to the Council will be clear and unambiguous: "My view remains that Ireland's future is bound with Europe's." End summary.

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The Taoiseach Speaks  
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¶2. Following the surprising defeat in Ireland of the Lisbon Treaty in a referendum on June 12, Taoiseach Brian Cowen spoke to the Dail on June 18 during a specially convened session to debate the referendum result. He warned that Ireland faced a period of uncertainty in the wake of the 'No' vote, and announced that he would not be calling on other EU states to scrap their ratification of the Treaty, saying that each country which has not yet ratified the Treaty should be allowed to do so. He declared that he did not believe the result constituted a rejection of Europe or of the need to change how the EU works. Nonetheless, he said the Government fully accepted the verdict of the people and that the "will of the people was sovereign in our democracy." He acknowledged that it was now up to the Government to "manage the political situation that has developed, both at home and internationally."

¶3. In his assessment of the referendum result, Cowen insisted it was too early to understand fully the significance of the referendum. He said the debate on the Treaty saw many disparate views - and in some cases contradictory positions - put forward by those advocating a rejection of the Treaty, which made it "particularly difficult to analyze the key messages underlying the outcome of the referendum."

¶4. Cowen went on to say that Ireland's place in the international arena had been realized through its membership of the EU over the past 35 years, and that throughout that time, the people of Ireland had been largely comfortable with the overall direction of the EU as it responded to regional and international priorities and developments. He disparaged the view that it would be possible for Ireland to exist entirely according to its own rules, yet shape the world around it, declaring that this was not the Government's view.

¶5. Cowen welcomed the "initial message of solidarity that was

apparent at the meeting of the General Affairs and External Relations Council [meeting] yesterday," (reftel) and said he would reiterate this at the European Council meeting on June 19. He emphasized, "I also will take the opportunity to restate to the Council my views that the vote does not mean Ireland is turning away from the EU or that it implies a desire to stand aside from engagement with our EU partners."

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More on What Went Wrong for the Yeas  
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¶16. During Cowen's speech to the Dail, he identified certain factors he felt buttressed the 'No' vote. The format of the Treaty, he said, became a major frustration for the electorate, because it was difficult to understand. He also noted the unease expressed that for five out of every fifteen years there would not be an Irish EU Commissioner. He stated that arguments were repeatedly advanced about a threat to Ireland's right to maintain its own tax system and tax rates, even though the Lisbon Treaty provided for a continuation of the legal arrangements that currently apply under existing Treaties.

¶17. Cowen remarked that many people were reportedly uneasy about a perceived risk that Europe would develop a common defense policy, requiring Ireland to abandon its military neutrality. This was compounded, he said, by concern that, at some hypothetical future date, this provision could give rise to a European army and an attempt to project European interests by military force, to which Ireland would be obliged to contribute - contrary to Ireland's traditions.

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¶18. Concerns were expressed regarding abortion, he stated, despite the specific assurances in terms of Ireland's legal arrangements in this regard. Concerns also arose, he said, about the possibility of a legal regime that would require the commercialization of public services, and introduce requirements to convert what have been regarded as essential public services into market opportunities.

¶19. Cowen noted the deep unease within the Irish farming community regarding the current strategy being adopted in negotiations at the World Trade Organization as a factor in the referendum's defeat. He identified other, more generalized anxieties, such as the current tightening internationally of economic conditions and the associated rising unemployment and inflation figures.

¶10. He declared that the core message - the need of the EU to function more efficiently, more democratically and more effectively in the international arena - did not sufficiently register with the public. In contrast, he mused, many voters seemed more comfortable citing examples where they felt the EU was not sufficiently in touch with concerns and needs of people at local level.

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Opposition Leaders Speak  
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¶11. Fine Gael leader Enda Kenny stated in the Dail on June 18 that several of the 'No' campaign slogans were based on lies or distortions and were repeatedly advanced despite being discredited by independent sources. "This was done with the clear intent to confuse people and create doubts in their minds," Kenny said. Nonetheless, he alleged that the Government's long delay in setting a date for the referendum created a vacuum in which false information was disseminated.

¶12. Labour leader Eamon Gilmore acknowledged that the Treaty was not an easy document to communicate. "The absence of a unified theme, that could be related to the everyday lives of our people, meant that from day one, we were explaining. And in politics, when you're explaining, you're losing," he said.

¶13. Sinn Fein's Dail leader Caoimhghin O Caolain, however, declared that the vote was a "positive assertion" by the Irish electorate of

their power to decide vital national issues, saying, "It was a vote about what type of EU we want to be part of developing. Will it be an EU of political elites and bureaucrats? Or will it be a democratic Europe of the people?"

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Comment  
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¶14. On June 19, the Taoiseach will travel to Brussels where he will outline the Irish Government's view of the referendum to the EU summit. While there has been speculation that the EU Presidency might offer Ireland concessions or opt-outs from core EU policies if it would help the Government win a new referendum on the Lisbon Treaty, Cowen will not be going hat-in-hand. Rather, as he told the Dail in his remarkable speech, he will tell the Council, "My view remains that Ireland's future is bound with Europe's."

FAUCHER